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# IS FATHERHOOD A FULL-TIME JOB?

## MIXED METHODS INSIGHTS INTO MEASURING STAY-AT-HOME FATHERHOOD

*Little is known about men who serve as primary caregivers for American families due to a lack of detailed questions on fatherhood and small numbers found in large-scale, nationally representative surveys. This paper moves beyond this limitation using a combination of in-depth interviews with 40 fathers and microdata from the 2005-2007 American Community Survey to critically assess whether the US Census Bureau accurately counts the number of male primary caregivers. Findings suggest that it likely underestimates the number who care full-time, by as many as 1.4 million, by not counting fathers who work part-time, report other reasons for being home and/or have been home less than one year. These results have important implications for how scholars more precisely measure emergent, transitioning forms of fatherhood.*

**Keywords:** full-time fatherhood, male primary caregivers, stay-at-home fathers, Census

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Despite a wealth of groundbreaking studies on fathers' increased involvement with children (see, e.g. Gershuny, 2001; O'Brien & Shemilt, 2003; Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004; Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kean & Hofferth, 2001) and full-time fathers living outside of the United States (Doucet, 2006; O'Brien, 1987; Smith, 1998; Wheelock, 1990), scholars know very little about men who serve as the primary caregivers for US families for three interrelated reasons. First, a scholarly interest on the "stalled revolution" (Hochschild, 1989) and emphasis on men's lack of equal participation in housework and childcare has implicitly fostered an absence of attention to households where men are taking primary responsibility and fathering full-time. Second, the fatherhood literature has noted an overall lack of nuanced questions probing the meaning of fatherhood or the behaviors fathers enact in the home in nationally representative, large-scale social surveys (Marsiglio, Amato, Day & Lamb, 2000). Third, surveys that do ask questions about fathers tend to have fewer nonresident father respondents, with most household

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surveys still allowing one household member (in many cases, the mother) to report on the actions of other members. This is especially true for stay-at-home fathers. Besides a numerical count published by the US Census Bureau each spring, there is a large gap in the literature on what it means (in light of one's past, present and future labor force participation and household behaviors) to identify as a "stay-at-home father" in the US and on how many men claim this identity in American families today.

I overcome these limitations by taking a mixed-methods approach to expose the underlying meaning of calling oneself a "stay-at-home father," and further, critically assess the accuracy of the US Census Bureau's numerical count of men who father full-time. First, I draw on in-depth interviews from a sample of 40 fathers (30 full-time caregivers and 10 full-time employed fathers) to understand how men who identify as "stay-at-home fathers" define this social status. I then use this information to evaluate whether these men meet the criteria used to generate the Census count. Next, I employ these qualitative findings to inform a second stage of analysis where I suggest revisions to the Census' measures. In doing so, I re-estimate (using the 2005-2007 American Community Survey sample) how many stay-at-home fathers *would be counted* if the Census criteria were altered. The outcomes of this empirical investigation have important implications for how we measure emergent, fluid forms of family (see Brown & Manning, 2009), and more specifically, fatherhood, as they respond and adapt to shifts in larger social, cultural and economic forces.

#### FATHERHOOD

Scholarship on masculinities and fatherhood in America first emerged in the 1970s (Lamb, 1975; Pleck, 1976) and grew rapidly in the mid-1980s to 1990s (Hobson, 2002; Marsiglio et al., 2000). As a result of growth in female labor force participation and the stagnation of male wages in the US during the 1970s, breadwinner-homemaker family forms declined and alternative ones took center stage (Berk, 1985; Gerson, 1993). Simultaneously, the rise in divorce, teenage pregnancies, and single parenthood led scholars to explore the consequences of "father absence" for children (Blankenhorn, 1995; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Popenoe, 1996), attempting to influence public policy (Daniels, 1998; Griswold, 1993) and investigate its impact on child developmental outcomes (Lamb, 1997, 1998, 2002; Parke, 1996). This early focus on the dichotomous absence/presence of fathers soon gave way to studies aimed at more meaningfully exploring the significance of the fatherhood identity to men (Daly, 1995; Ihinger-Tallman, Pasley & Buehler, 1995; Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000; Messner, 1997; Stacey, 1998).

At its core, fatherhood is a historically contingent social construction. In other words, variations in what it means to be a "good father" shift over time and take on diverse forms in response to cultural and institutional change (Cherlin, 1998; LaRossa, 1997; LaRossa, Gordon, Wilson, Bairan & Jaret, 1991; Pleck & Pleck, 1997; Stearns, 1991). In addition, many argue that caretaking is not an innate, biological phenomenon, but is constructed to be a "feminine" skill. In support of this claim, Lamb's (1997) review of the literature on caretaking in an array of Western cultures concluded that neither of the

sexes possesses a “natural” ability to care for children, and thus, parenting skills are acquired primarily through experience. Building on this notion, Rotundo (1985) and Pleck (1987) argued that the “new fatherhood” ideal is characterized by intimate, active, compassionate involvement in the lives of offspring. Despite the media popularity of this image, LaRossa (1988) critiques this ideal, stating that while the “culture of fatherhood” (i.e., shared norms and beliefs) has changed, the “conduct of fatherhood” (i.e., men’s actual behavior) is largely unaltered, as evidenced by a lack of egalitarianism and large number of neglectful fathers (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Carlson, 2006; Coltrane, 1996; King, Harris & Heard 2004).

Research tends to support LaRossa’s assertions (Blakenhorn, 1995; Craig, 2006; Lamb & Tamis-Lemonda 2004; Parke, 1996; Popenoe, 1996). While scholars note that the rise in women’s labor force participation and education, and a growing cultural emphasis on fathering, could foster an environment conducive to gender equality (Bianchi, 1995; Sanchez & Thomson, 1997; Waite & Goldscheider, 1992), this ideal has not been met to date. On one hand, scholars find that fathers are more involved in the lives of children than in the past (Doucet, 2006; O’Brien & Shemilt, 2003; Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004; Pleck & Pleck, 1997) and are spending more hours conducting “fatherly activities” (Gershuny, 2001; Yeung et al., 2001). Despite this change, many men still tend to identify themselves as “helpers” in the home and often experience conflict in balancing roles (Coltrane, 2000; Gerson, 1993; LaRossa & LaRossa, 1981; Risman, 1998). In sum, while men’s hours of participation in fathering have risen, they have not increased enough to match a simultaneous rise in women’s hours of paid employment (Beaujot, 2000; Doucet, 2006).

Despite this proof that fathers still do fewer hours of housework and childcare than mothers (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer & Robinson, 2000; Brines, 1994; Sanchez & Thomson, 1997; Sayer, 2005), researchers continue to investigate predictors of fatherly involvement and delineate what “responsible” or “generative” fathering looks like (Booth & Crouter, 1998; Dollahite & Hawkins, 1998; Snarey, 1993). Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson (1990, 1998) first introduced the concept of “responsible fatherhood,” a father-child relationship characterized by acknowledged paternity, presence in a child’s life, economic support, and active involvement with the child. Still, Doherty et al.’s implicit assumption that “responsible fathering” necessities men filling a breadwinner role only reinforces the construction of “father” as a financial provider.

In addition, there have been relatively few empirical studies conducted on men who father full-time (Barker, 1994; Doucet, 2006; Doucet and Merla, 2007; Frank, 1995; Grbich, 1994, 1997; Merla 2008; O’Brien, 1987; Rochlen et al., 2008; Smith, 1998; Wheelock, 1990). While qualitative studies of dual-parenting couples (Coltrane, 1996; Doucet, 2000; Risman, 1998), men taking parental leave (Brandth & Kvande, 1998; Haas, 2004; Haas, Allard and Hwang, 2002), men who wish to stay home (Gerson, 1993), single custodial fathers (Risman, 1983; Meyer & Garasky, 1993; Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2010) and men’s thoughts towards balancing work and fatherhood (Townsend, 2002) have illuminated ways men accept, construct, and negotiate the caregiver identity, very little has been done on male primary caregivers living in the US specifically

and/or from a sociological perspective. Despite mounting media attention that's been paid to these fathers in recent years, we know very little about American stay-at-home fathers besides the yearly Census count. Even with Marsiglio et al.'s (2000, p. 1186) suggestion that scholars "understand how fathering roles are defined, negotiated, and expressed in diverse contexts," more work is needed on men who take active roles in the home.

#### WHO COUNTS?

Some claim this lack of scholarship in the US is due to the fact that so few men take on full-time care work in families. For example, in 2008, the Census reports that there were 140,000 stay-at-home fathers out of the 25.8 million married co-residential fathers (Table 1), prompting many to discount their sociological import. Certainly, they represent a small proportion of the US population, but with little knowledge about them, can we be certain the Census accurately captures how many men actually *identify* as "stay-at-home dads"?

Table 1  
*Census Count of Stay-at-Home Fathers (1998-2008)*

Year	Census Count
2008	140,000*
2007	185,000
2006	159,000
2005	143,000
2004	147,000
2003	98,000
2002	106,000
2001	81,000
2000	93,000
1999	71,000
1998	90,000

\*Out of 25.8 million married fathers with children under the age of 15 in the US in 2008.

Source: <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam.html>

According to the Census (2008), a stay-at-home father is: "A married father with children under 15 years old who has remained out of the labor force for more than one year primarily so he can care for his family while his wife works outside the home." Based on this definition, the Census calculates the number of full-time fathers using a question asked of respondents who are "not in the labor force" (i.e., have no job and have not looked for work or worked any weeks in the last year). It is reasonable to hy-

pothesize that a large number of stay-at-home fathers are left out of the count by virtue of not fitting this criteria.<sup>1</sup> For example, gay, single, divorced and cohabiting fathers (all groups whose numbers have risen in recent decades) are not in the count because of their marital status. In addition, it leaves out men who remain home until children are independent or who care for a child with a long-term disability.

The definition's employment criteria likely remove significantly greater numbers from the count. Fathers who worked as little as one week in the last year or looked for work at any point in this period are classified as being "in the labor force," and thus, are not in the count. This stipulation also excludes primary caregivers who were laid off or quit their job at any point during the last year. It also eliminates the possibility that a stay-at-home father could participate in any freelance, temporary, part-time, third shift, work from home or seasonal work. This is particularly noteworthy given the deeply entrenched social and cultural expectations that fathers monetarily provide for their families. Just as many stay-at-home mothers seek to earn extra income, fathers might feel doubly compelled to do so because of the stigma associated with being unemployed and a caregiver, two roles that are not traditionally associated with the masculine or fatherly ideal. In addition, if a father's wife was between jobs, and thus, "not in the labor force" for one or more weeks in the past year, he would also not be in the count (Table 2).

Finally, the Census count potentially overlooks even more men by imposing assumptions about the duration of stay-at-home fatherhood. Given the aforementioned social pressures, it is possible that full-time fatherhood is shorter in duration than

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau data (including the more recently released American Community Survey microdata and the March Supplement of the Current Population Survey released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics) are the primary sources of data on general family trends (such as living arrangements and household types) in the U.S. These data sources are also the primary ones cited in research on the number of "stay-at-home parents" in the US today. Beginning in 1960, the Census began to characterize people as either being "in the labor force" or "not in the labor force." The earliest historical Census report available online is based on March 1978 data. According to the Census, the "not in the labor force" group includes people who are: "neither employed nor seeking work includ[ing] persons engaged only in own home housework, attending school, or unable to work because of long-term physical or mental illness; persons who are retired or too old to work, seasonal workers ... and the voluntary idle. Persons doing only unpaid family work (less than 15 hours) are also classified as not in the labor force" (Bureau of the Census 1978, p. 153). In more current Census reports (e.g., Kreider & Elliot, 2007), the term "stay-at-home parent" only began to be employed by the Census in more recent decades. I hypothesize that this is due to the increase in women's labor force participation throughout the 1970s, growing media interest in groups like stay-at-home fathers, and debates, such as whether women are "opting out" of the labor force to stay home. Since this term was first used and estimates were published by the Census in its reports, the term "stay-at-home parent," for men and women, was defined as how many married men or women with children under the age of 15 have a spouse who was in the labor force the entire last year and are not themselves in the labor force for the reason 'taking care of home and family.' Thus, the Census has always used the "not in the labor force" because he or she is "taking care of home and family" criteria. However, the Bureau has only used the actual term "stay-at-home parent" in more recent research reports from the 1990s and 2000s. For example, each Father's Day, the Census typically releases a report which includes the number of stay-at-home fathers in the U.S. that year. While the Census has not published any specific rationale for why they chose to adopt this definition, one can speculate that it's designed to estimate the count very conservatively, or perhaps with the theory that it's better to undercount rather than overcount such groups.

Table 2  
*Breakdown of Census' Stay-at-Home Father Count (2008)*

A) Father in LF 1 or more weeks last year	21,409,000
B) Father NILF 52 weeks last year (reason = caring for home & family; Spouse in LF 52 weeks last year)	140,000 (Stay-at-Home Fathers)
C) Father NILF 52 weeks last year (reason = caring for home & family; Spouse NILF 1 or more weeks last year)	57,000
D) Father NILF 52 weeks last year for other reason (ill or disabled, retired, going to school, could not find work or other)	838,000

*Source:* March 2008 Current Population Survey.

*Note:* "LF" = Labor Force, "NILF" = Not in Labor Force.

stay-at-home motherhood or fathers feel pressure to reenter the labor force or eliminate gaps in their resumes, especially if they are not staying home by choice but due to termination or an unsuccessful job search. Similarly, fathers who only plan to stay home temporarily might misrepresent their employment status or offer another reason for why they are not working. To be classified as a stay-at-home father by the Census, a father must be completely out of the labor force and provide the sole reason "taking care of home and family," despite the other listed options of "retired," "illness or disability," "going to school," "could not find work" or "other." Research has not yet established whether fathers see "taking care of the home" as an accurate reflection of their job description, making this language another potential deterrent for men who might otherwise be counted.

The data displayed in Table 2 reinforce this notion that the Census likely undercounts the number of stay-at-home fathers. As shown in Row B, only fathers who are "not in the labor force" for all 52 weeks of the last year, have a spouse who was in the labor force for all 52 weeks of the prior year, and state "taking care of home and family" to explain why they are "not in the labor force" are considered "stay-at-home fathers." If the Census included fathers who specify another reason for being out of the labor force and counted fathers with working spouses who were between jobs at any time in the last year, the 140,000 count would jump to just over one million. This number would likely grow considerably if the Census also included gay fathers, cohabiting fathers and part-time working fathers in the stay-at-home father count.

#### HYPOTHESIS

Based on this assessment, what we have learned about the transitory nature of stay-at-home fatherhood outside the US (Doucet, 2006), the historically entrenched connections between work and masculinity, and the stigma associated with male unemployment and care work, I anticipated that the majority of stay-at-home fathers I interviewed would be participating in some type of employment while home (and thus, out of the count). I examined this hypothesis with in-depth interviews, further inquiring whether fathers interpret staying home as temporary, plan to reenter the labor force, and embrace or reject the identity, particularly if they are not home by choice.

## METHOD

*Approach*

Because most nationally representative surveys tend to have small samples of full-time fathers, ask limited questions on the meaning of fatherhood, and tend to measure only two aspects of father involvement (quantity and type), I use a mixed-methods approach that combines semi-structured, in-depth interviews with secondary quantitative analysis of Census microdata. Certainly, recent attempts to refine our conceptualization and measurement of father involvement have improved the survey data available (see, e.g., Marsiglio et al. 2005; Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics 1998). Nevertheless, the interview component was advantageous in gaining a more nuanced understanding of the fatherhood experience and studying smaller, statistically rare subpopulations (such as men who father full-time). In addition, qualitative work is said to be especially useful when examining a social phenomenon that has not been studied in great detail (See, e.g., Strauss & Corbin, 1990), which is also true of full-time fatherhood in the US.

*In-depth interviews*

I conducted in-depth interviews, ranging from one to three hours in length, and administered weeklong time diaries to a sample of 40 fathers living primarily in North Carolina and Pennsylvania. Thirty of these fathers self-identified as the “primary caregiver” for their family and ten others were employed full-time and used as a reference group. In particular, I was interested in comparing the housework and parenting behaviors of these two groups, but for this paper, I will focus exclusively on the 30 male primary caregivers. I recruited 40 percent of my respondents using snowball sampling. I began by advertising the study on listservs (with personal contacts), parenting group and organizational listservs, Facebook groups and message boards, Craigslist (under the “volunteer” section), and in businesses fathers frequent (gyms, grocery stores, etc). I recruited carefully to avoid defining my target population in the same way the Census does. In other words, I advertised for male “primary caregivers” but did not explicitly say I was looking for “stay-at-home fathers.” In addition, I did not require that the men I interview be out of the labor force, as long as they were the “primary caregiver” of their children, allowing me to collect a more diverse sample. Still, my method of recruiting and the language I used in advertising the study inevitably shaped the pool of respondents I ended up with. While I purposely sought to capture a wide and diverse collection of men who define themselves as “stay-at-home fathers,” I do not contend that my pool defines stay-at-home fathers *definitively* or represents their population as a whole.

Fathers who expressed a desire to participate in the study were instructed to contact me (via email, mailing address, or telephone) to obtain more information. Upon doing so, they were mailed a study description, a time diary packet to fill out, and instructions

to contact me upon its completion. At this time, I arranged to meet the father at a public location that was convenient to their home or workplace. In several instances, the interviews were conducted at the respondent's home if childcare was not available or the respondent expressed preference for this. Three interviews took place over the telephone. I also discussed completed time diaries with fathers and inquired whether they knew any other men who might be interested in participating. From there, I continued to snowball sample until I achieved a sample size of 40. The fathers who were not recruited through snowball sampling contacted me directly after seeing ads online or posted in public locations.

As displayed in Table 3, the average age of full-time fathers in my sample is 37 and the average age of their children is 4. In terms of racial and ethnic background, my sample can be characterized as heavily white and middle to upper middle class, but includes representation from Black, Hispanic, and Asian fathers, as well as working class and lower middle-class families. While the average family income and educational at-

Table 3  
*Summary Statistics for Qualitative Sample*

	Primary Caregiver Fathers	Full-time Employed Fathers
Mean Age	37	35.3
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>		
White	25	7
Black	3	1
Hispanic	2	0
Asian	0	2
Mean age of children (Current marriage)	4.27	4.74
Mean number of children	1.88	2
<i>Respondents' parents' marital status</i>		
Married	22	7
Divorced	8	3
<i>Educational attainment</i>		
High school	2	0
Some college	4	1
College	12	2
Graduate	12	7
<i>Mean household income (pre-tax)*</i>	\$96,000	\$105,000
Min:	\$20,000	\$42,000
Max:	\$150,000	\$150,000
<i>N</i>	30	10

\*Incomes > \$150,000 were recoded to \$150,000 when calculating the mean.

tainment for my sample is above the national average, this is likely reflective of the socioeconomic status households with men who select themselves into stay-at-home fatherhood possess. In some senses, stay-at-home fatherhood (like stay-at-home motherhood) is an option that is more readily available to privileged groups in society. All of the men in my sample were currently married, in a heterosexual partnership, and had children under the age of 15 (though not required to be so to participate). At the end of many interviews with fathers, I enquired whether they knew any stay-at-home fathers who were not married, but unfortunately, was unable to recruit such men through snowball sampling techniques. Perhaps, men who are married are more likely to self-select themselves into stay-at-home fatherhood in the same way men of higher socioeconomic status might as well. In future stages of this research, I plan to purposively sample a more diverse collection of men who consider themselves “primary caregivers” but are not married.

The interviews were extensive and took an average of two hours to complete. Single-spaced transcriptions of them ranged in length from 20 to 35 pages. I used a semi-structured guide, allowing me to cover a series of topics while also inserting follow-up questions and adding new areas of inquiry when appropriate. The interviews allowed me to capture the detail underlying fathers’ decision making processes, beliefs and behaviors in the home, all of which are difficult to decipher using close-ended survey questions. Interview sections targeted respondents’ family histories, work histories, past, present and future employment plans, perspectives on fatherhood, understandings of their familial role, fatherly responsibilities, gender ideologies, beliefs about what being a “stay-at-home father” means, mental health and social support systems. A copy of the primary caregiver interview guide can be provided upon request.

After transcribing the interviews, I used qualitative data analysis software (ATLAS.ti) to code and empirically evaluate the interview data (see Weitzman, 1999, 2003; Hwang, 2008 for overviews of QDA software). This software allowed me to manage, assess, and extract meaning from my collection of interviews via coding techniques. The first step involved coding the interviews using a set of preconceived codes that emerged from my review of the fatherhood literature, transcription process, and guiding research questions.<sup>2</sup> By manually coding sentences and paragraphs of each interview with these designated codes, I added a new level of meaning to the text and created interpretable units of analysis that I could analyze, with a goal of extracting patterns in fathers’ experi-

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<sup>2</sup> For this paper, I was interested in coding the interviews based on preconceived codes that dealt with the criteria used by the Census. Hence, in my first stage of coding, I coded the interviews for things such as: participation in the labor force, reference to the term “stay-at-home father” or the “stay-at-home dad” identity, age of children, marital status, reasons for staying home (references to retirement, unemployment, school, taking care of home and family, disability, etc.). After coding these interviews in reference to the Census criteria, I completed a second stage of coding in which new codes and patterns emerged from the interviews and connections between codes came to the surface. For example, I found that many fathers balanced multiple identities, and thus I coded for examples of “identity work” in which they adjusted their “stay-at-home dad” and “worker” identities depending on their audience. Some other emergent codes include: longevity of staying home, discussions of future employment opportunities, rationale for the length of staying home, relationship between one’s identity and social support, etc.

ences, beliefs, and behaviors. In addition, by attaching more than one code to sections and organizing the interviews into what Atlas.ti calls “families” (groups based on pre-determined categories like age, household income, employment status, etc.), I generated networks of relationships between concepts and searched for variations in meaning between particular types of respondents in my sample. Next, I did a second level of examination in which I re-read the coded interviews and allowed new and revised codes to emerge from the text. This extended, two-step coding process allowed me to refine and enrich my understanding of the data.

#### AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY

My second methodological approach was conducted after transcribing, coding and analyzing the interviews. My objective was to employ the qualitative results to inform a re-estimation of how many American men serve as their family’s primary caregiver (but are not represented in the Census’ count). To do this, I downloaded Census microdata from the 2005-2007 American Community Survey (“ACS”) using the IPUMS database (Minnesota Population Center, 2009; U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). The ACS is a survey administered annually (with data collected monthly on independent samples) in all US counties by the U.S. Census Bureau to gather economic, social, demographic and housing data (that was formerly only collected every 10 years by the population Census). Households are mailed a questionnaire and each year, nearly 2 million housing units are surveyed. In addition to the release of this data, in 2008, the Census Bureau began providing “PUMS” of multi-year datasets, such as the 2005-2007 data I use here. I chose the multi-year file because it is said to be particularly advantageous for studying small populations (IPUMS, 2010). I created and downloaded an extract of ACS 2005-2007 data that included variables for household number, person number, age of youngest child in household, relationship to household head, sex, marital status, employment status, weeks worked last year, usual hours worked per week and survey weights. Next, using STATA, I matched married men to their female spouses within households and created two new variables to indicate the (1) weeks a wife worked last year and (2) the wife’s usual hours worked per week last year for each married man in the sample.

Next, I generated estimates of how many men are staying home by expanding and varying the Census criteria to include men who are working minimal amounts, had wives with high labor force participation, and/or gave any reason for not currently being in the labor force. I calculated estimates using two units for men’s labor force participation (usual hours worked last week and usual weeks worked last year) within the calendar year reference period and I varied the universe (the age of children and the wife’s employment status) the number was based on. First, I looked at how many currently married, co-residential fathers with children under the ages of 18 (and then 15) “usually worked” less than 20 *hours per week* and have wives who “usually worked” more than 30 hours a week in the previous year. Next, I computed estimates of how many fathers with children worked less than 20 (and then less than 10) *weeks per year* and have

wives who worked more than 30 (and then more than 48) weeks. Finally, I estimated how many fathers are “not currently at work” (e.g., have a job but are not currently working, are unemployed but still “in the labor force,” or are “not in the labor force” for any reason) and have a spouse who is “currently at work” (e.g., in the labor force, employed). It is important to note that the first two methods rely on a measure that indicates usual hours or weeks that respondents and their spouses worked in the *previous year*, while the third method uses a reference period of *current* labor force status at time of interview.

## RESULTS

### *In-depth Interviews*

Identity work. After asking respondents an extensive series of questions, I found that all 30 primary caregivers in the sample identified themselves as a “stay-at-home father” before I introduced the term. Some fathers immediately took a defensive tone when identifying themselves as such, while others simply stated it in a matter-of-fact manner. For example, when I asked one father what his “current main occupation was,” he responded, “I would say I was a stay-at-home dad. No, I don’t have to change my identity. I know I am quite competent at ... I know I have my skills. I don’t have to call myself something else. I know I could get a job if we needed it ... a good job!” In contrast, another father matter-of-factly said, “I’d say I’m a stay-at-home parent. I stay home with the kids.” For an older father who had recently remarried and had newborns, it was more complicated. For this father, the identity he embraced depended on his audience, stating:

I’d say it depends on whom I’m talking to. I’m a photographer... I mean obviously my mainstay is stay-at-home dad ... I don’t have a lot of time for anything else. But ... we kind of look at it economically like, okay, let me kind of try to develop this a little bit further to make up some of this income loss. So, if I’m talking to someone who needs a photographer, I’m going to tell him: ‘I’m a photographer.’ Or, if they seem like a family with young kids, I’ll say I’m a photographer and I stay at home. I would say it that way. But, if I’m talking to somebody who’s a friend or knows me, I’m going to tell them I’m a stay-at-home dad.

This illustrates the constant “identity work” some stay-at-home fathers engage in, shifting the labels they use to define themselves and information they give out depending on the level of familiarity they had with their audience and their conversational objectives.

*Labor force participation.* While all 30 primary caregivers identified themselves as a “stay-at-home father” and most named this as their “current main occupation,” when I asked whether they’d brought in any income or worked any weeks since staying home, 60 percent reported that they had (Figure 1). For these fathers, employment was con-

### LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION

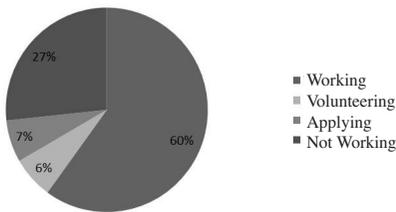


Figure 1. Stay-at-home fathers' labor force participation ( $N = 30$ ).

ducted on a freelance or intermittent basis whenever they could find the time to do it without sacrificing the needs of their family. Their work included: self employment (web design, statistical consulting, contractor work), writing, editing and publishing (freelance, blogs, novels, children's books, local magazines), coaching and announcing for sports teams, pet sitting, photography, working for local universities, substitute teaching, adjunct instructor work at community colleges, graduate school teaching and research assistantships, acting and voiceover work, project management for non-profits, musical/band gigs, grocery store work, and catering.

The line between one's home identity and occupational identity was complicated for many of these men. For example, when I asked the simple question "What is your current main occupation?," one father said,

I won't give you the corny answer that my first job is being a parent, because, in a way, it is, but I know that's not what you mean. Primarily, I do web design and writing.

While this father later identified himself as a "stay-at-home dad," he seemed reluctant to cite it as his main occupation. For example, when asked whether he felt stay-at-home fatherhood was a full-time occupation, he said:

I mean, really ... I didn't say that originally because I think it sometimes comes off as corny, but it is. He is my life ... I don't consider it work being [his] dad but he is the most important thing in our life.

In contrast, another father who worked 25 to 30 hours a week at a local grocery store while staying home seemed more eager to embrace the identity despite his extensive outside employment, saying "[I'm] a stay-at-home dad, without a doubt."

These examples illustrate just how complex the balance between stay-at-home fathers' familial and occupational identities is, which begs the question: When does this outside employment take place? Stay-at-home fathers had a number of arrangements, ranging from working third shift and evening shifts several nights a week or on week-ends to working from home during the day when children were asleep or at school. A few fathers occasionally hired babysitters so they'd have a small block of time to do

paid work, while others reported working on the computer and conducting business while their children played nearby. For example, one stay-at-home father cared for his daughter while finishing up an advanced degree from home. When asked how many hours he worked each week, he replied,

The last 2 years since I've been staying home with [my daughter], it's been a lot less ... I mean, a lot of my work would be sitting at a computer and [her] being there and going and playing with her for 5 minutes and then coming up with a paragraph and going back to the computer to write it down.

One father worked at night and on Saturdays, another edited novels from home during daytime nap times, and a third created a dog walking business to make money with his kids along.

In addition to these "working" stay-at-home fathers, two more had submitted job applications in the past year, and three others volunteered with hopes of it leading to a job.

*Reasons for employment.* The reasons this 60 percent of fathers in my sample provided for being employed while staying home varied and were often dependent on the financial stability and security of the wife's job and income. For many, their wives made more than enough money to provide a comfortable living while also allowing them to save for things like college funds and retirement. For these fathers, outside work was framed not as being vital to the family's financial wellbeing, but instead, as what one called "fun money." For example, a stay-at-home father with two children continued to work, on a freelance basis, for his former boss when she needed help during busy season. He reported making ten dollars an hours, saying,

I don't do it for the money. I might make, you know, \$600 to \$1,000 bucks, give or take. I just look at it as, you know, it pays for the trip I might make with my son to a city to watch a baseball game this year or the cell phone bill ... it's nothing that helps sustain us as a family by any stretch.

In other words, working allowed this father to contribute monetarily, even if in a much smaller capacity, while reaping other benefits associated with being employed.

Fathers also reported seeking employment to overcome the isolation and lack of adult social interaction associated with stay-at-home parenthood. Because they often expressed difficulty being accepted into mother's playgroups or felt awkward asking mothers to hang out one-on-one, many reported spending long hours at home without other adult interaction. Thus, working or volunteering gave them an outlet for socializing and mental stimulation. In addition, the self-esteem benefits associated with employment, earning money, and having an identity besides "full-time dad" were attractive. One father joked about the effects stay-at-home parenting can have on mental sharpness, saying, "I still have to entertain my mind... when you are home parenting, [you] feel like your brain is turning to mush so you have to do something to keep it in shape." For another stay-at-home father living in a military town, socializing with

mothers was particularly hard, prompting him to seek interaction via evening and weekend volunteer work, stating: “There’s a mom around our neighborhood and she’d say, oh yeah, all the moms do this. If I say, “Can I come?” she’d say, “Oh no, I don’t think that’d be a good idea.”

On the other hand, for fathers whose wives had lower earnings, being employed while also acting as a “stay-at-home father” was a necessity. Several of these fathers worked night shifts and weekend shifts, consistently working 25 to 35 hours-a-week and staying home during the day so their family could be on a more comfortable financial footing. Despite their high level of labor force participation, these men still identified themselves as a stay-at-home father because the majority of their child’s day (when awake) was under their care. About half of the men in my sample also reported concerns over having gaps in their resumes, especially if they wanted to work longer hours, reenter a full-time job, or enable their wife to stay home in the future. In these cases, current employment allowed them to tell future employers they were doing “something” besides “just raising kids” during the time they spent at home. One father summarized these feelings well when talking about his current volunteer position, saying:

Well ... right now I am volunteering at [this business] about 6 hours a week and that’s a place I’d love to work. I’m not saying there is a job there for me, but if there is, I’d be really happy about it. Taking care of kids for four years is a big resume hole and I guess I’m anxious about that. I mean, I know how biased I am about other stay-at-home dads. On some level, I see a stay-at-home dad and think, what’s wrong with you? I know what’s wrong with me, but what’s wrong with you? I joke about it, but honestly, I have that reaction, so if I’m having that reaction, everyone’s having that reaction. Maybe that’s not fair to say, but so many people are. So, [I want to be] doing something other than taking care of [my daughter] on my resume ... but it’s also something for me to get out of the house and interact with people and use my brain.

Despite the diverse reasons these fathers sought outside work, all stay-at-home fathers who are employed in any capacity are excluded from the Census’ count.

*Duration of full-time fatherhood.* Of the 40% of stay-at-home fathers who had not been employed or earned income since they began taking care of their children full-time, only a third of them said they had no plans to reenter the labor force in the future. The other two-thirds had specific plans to reenter the labor force within the next five years (Figure 2). The majority expressed the belief that their time at home was only *essential* to their children’s wellbeing until they were in school most of the day (or the youngest child reached age 5). At this point, while a few fathers said their children would still need them, most admitted that they’d feel bored or even “lazy” staying home after this point. In other words, over 80% of self-identified “stay-at-home fathers” interpreted staying home as a short-term situation that would likely end within the next five years (Figure 3). One father who had returned to the labor force once his daughters were both in school provided his thoughts on the matter, saying, “I couldn’t justify

## FATHERS WHO HAVE NOT WORKED

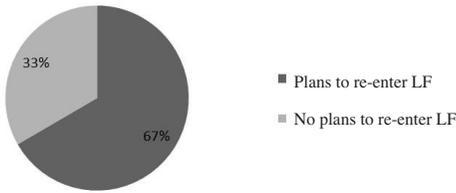


Figure 2. Non-working stay-at-home fathers' plans to re-enter the labor force ( $N = 30$ ).

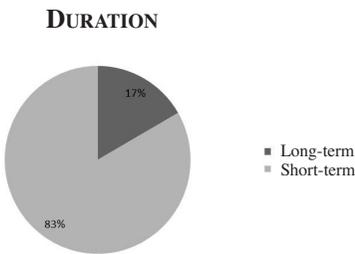


Figure 3. Stay-at-home fathers' anticipation duration of time at home ( $N = 30$ ).

staying at home and playing guitar all day long so I definitely needed to contribute financially ... the house was empty and the kids weren't in it, so I just transitioned." For three fathers who had just begun staying home less than one year ago, most talked about it as being an "experimental" or "trial period," saying they would like to "see how things go" and then reevaluate what is best for their families or whether their wife would like to stay home.

*Educational pursuits.* In addition to seeing full-time fatherhood as relatively short in duration, 1 in 5 of the stay-at-home fathers I interviewed had either taken courses in the past year or planned to apply to schools to prepare for future employment (Figure 4). Similar to the fathers who worked part-time, these men attended class and did assignments in the evenings and on the weekends. Because the Census gives "going to school" as another reason a man could be out of the labor force, it is possible that these fathers would report this instead of "taking care of house and family" when interviewed. When I asked one dad, who was about to finish graduate school and was currently applying for jobs, about his thoughts on this, he said,

I thought of my position as a stay-at-home dad as temporary. Our plan is for me to get a job and for her to be a stay-at-home mom for as long as she wants to be.

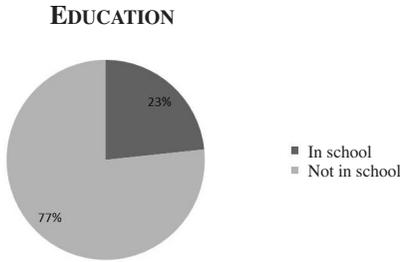


Figure 4. Stay-at-home fathers' continuing education ( $N = 30$ ).

Another father, who had been working long hours and traveling before he resigned from his job, used his time at home to plan a new career, saying,

"I'm going to completely switch gears. I'm studying for the GRE now and hopefully, just before she enters kindergarten, I'll have my education finished to start teaching."

#### AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY ESTIMATES

Because 60 percent of the primary caregivers in my sample had been employed in some capacity since they began identifying as a "stay-at-home father," my next step was to use these qualitative findings to guide my re-estimation of how many men stay home when the criteria are expanded to include men who work or provide multiple reasons for not being in the labor force. When asking the fathers in my sample how many hours per week a stay-at-home father could theoretically work and still fulfill his role as the primary caregiver, the average number given was 20 hours. According to these fathers, it is impossible to father well if you are attempting to do work while taking care of children during the day, but if employment takes place during times when children are in school, at night, or on the weekends, a father is not shirking his responsibilities or stretching the boundaries of "stay-at-home fatherhood."

Based on these results, I calculated new estimates for how many stay-at-home fathers there are in the US using three methods (Table 4). For all three methods, I begin by estimating a count for married fathers with children under the age of 18 (to avoid eliminating men who stay home until their children are legal adults or have children with long-term disabilities) and then re-estimate the number for men with children under 15 (to more directly match the Census' criteria). My first re-estimation (Method A) used the reference period of "usual hours worked per week in the previous year." This count included fathers who have spouses who worked at least 30 hours per week in the previous year. When I restricted fathers' hours worked to no more than 20 per week and set the age of children at 15 (as the Census does), the number of stay-at-home fathers is 700,000. Even if I set the maximum age of the children at 5, a number far lower than the Census criteria, there are approximately 237,000 stay-at-home fathers in the US (nearly 100,000 more than the 2008 Census count of 140,000).

Table 4

*New Stay-at-Home Father Estimates from the American Community Survey*

<i>Criteria for Estimate</i>	<i>Number of Stay-at-Home Fathers</i>
Method #1: Married fathers who worked 20 hours or less per week in the previous year & have spouses who worked 30 hours per week or more in the previous year	
Children under age 18	966,000
Children under age 15	700,000
Children under age 5	237,000
Method #2A: Married fathers who worked 20 weeks or less in the previous year & have spouses who worked 30 or more weeks in the previous year	
Children under age 18	1,400,000
Children under age 15	1,186,000
Children under age 5	460,000
Method #2B: Married fathers who worked 10 weeks or less in the previous year & have spouses who worked 48 or more weeks in the previous year	
Children under age 18	577,000
Children under age 15	455,000
Children under age 5	200,000
Method #3: Married fathers who are not currently at work & have spouses who are currently employed & at work	
Children under age 18	1,446,000
Children under age 15	1,167,000
Children under age 5	400,000

Source: 2005-2007 American Community Survey (Census Microdata)

For a second estimation, I used the reference period of “usual weeks worked in the past year.” This estimate counted how many married fathers worked 20 weeks or less last year and had spouses who worked 30 or more weeks in the past year (Method 2A) and then varied the universe to measure how many fathers worked 10 weeks or less and had spouses who worked 48 or more weeks (Method 2B). In addition, I varied the age of children to see how it changed when the maximum age was reduced from 18 to 15 years for both universes. I found there are 1.4 million married fathers with children under age 18 who worked less than 20 weeks in the previous year and had spouses who worked at least 30 weeks in the previous year. When I capped the weeks fathers worked at 10, increased their spouses’ to at least 48 week, and set the age of children to under 15, there are 577,000 stay-at-home fathers in the US. In addition, when I lower the age

of children to 5 for this group (a criteria far more strict than the Census), I find there are 200,000 stay-at-home fathers, a number that is 60,000 higher than the current Census count of 140,000 (which sets the age of children at 15).

Finally, I estimated (Method C) how many fathers with children in the same age ranges as used above are classified as “not currently at work,” “unemployed,” or “not in the labor force” for any reason and have a spouse who is employed, in the labor force, and currently “at work.” In Table 4, we see that there are nearly 1.5 million married fathers with children under 18 who are not currently “with job” or “at work” but have wives who are. When I limit the count to men with children under the age of 15, the number drops to just over 1 million. Even when I cap the age of children at 5, I find that there are 400,000 married fathers who are not currently at work and have a spouse who is, a number that is nearly three times the Census’ estimate.

It is important to note that these results, while significant, are still based imperfect measures. First, the March 2008 CPS supplement and the 2005-2007 ACS sample are not drawn from an identical pool of respondents, but I account for this by using weights to assure that my sample is nationally representative. In addition, my first two estimates use employment indicators from the past year, while the third uses a current indicator from the date of the interview. Things can change over the course of one year, making these estimates difficult to compare. Finally, I cannot account for cohabiting, divorced or gay fathers with these data or prove that these men may not be caring for their children even though they are not currently at work. For example, I cannot determine whether a father who works only 20 hours a week and has a spouse working 30 hours a week is spending the rest of his week taking care of his children, nor can I isolate how much primary care work is required in each household or whether these fathers identify as a “stay-at-home father” when they are not working. Still, one might hypothesize that some (if not most) of these fathers, especially those with young children, are their family’s primary caregiver. More importantly, it provides us with an estimate we can use to compare and contrast with the Census numbers and move toward a more accurate portrayal of what’s really going on in American households today.

## DISCUSSION

This paper uses a mixed-methods approach to study a relatively unexamined, emerging form of fatherhood in America that is rarely studied due to a lack of large-scale survey data. I employ in-depth interviews in combination with Census microdata from the American Community Survey to examine whether the Census Bureau, one of few sources of information on this group, is correctly counting the number of men who father full-time in the US today. I find that the majority of men in my sample who identify as a “stay-at-home fathers” would be left out of the Census count because they have applied for jobs, worked or earned money while staying home, or are home because they have also retired, were laid off or are in school. Moreover, new estimates show that the Census likely undercounts, by as many as 1.4 million, the number of male primary caregivers in the US today.

These findings offer several critical insights and implications on how we can better approach, measure and understand full-time fatherhood both within and outside of the US. First, the findings suggest that we must rethink our definition of stay-at-home fatherhood and consider the possibility of including fathers who simultaneously participate in some employment, especially if it is not occurring during the hours when children are home, awake, or not supervised by another adult. With shifting economic conditions, it seems increasingly likely that stay-at-home parents, regardless of gender, might attempt to bring in additional income without jeopardizing their ability to be the family's primary caregiver. In addition, because of the persistent gender wage gap, female breadwinner families (when compared to male breadwinner families) likely have a lower mean household income. From this wage gap perspective, it makes sense that stay-at-home fathers are more likely to need to supplement their wives' income and work part-time, lessening the chance they could choose to "opt out" of the labor force long-term.

Alternatively, the trend toward increased homogeneity in education and income in the US marriage market might also be increasing the number of self-identified stay-at-home father families. Because two high earners are more likely to marry each other now than in the past and the number of married households where the wife's income exceeds the husband's is increasing (Fry & Cohn, 2010), it might "make more sense" to primarily live off of one income than both work full-time when children are young. It is also important to note that many men in my sample were able to be employed or go to school because their wives took over childcare and household responsibilities during weekends and/or evening shifts and supported these endeavors. This truth, coupled with heightened pressure from social and cultural expectations linking masculinity and fatherhood with "providing," could make full-time fathers even more likely to seek some type of employment while still identifying as a "stay-at-home parent." No matter the reason for employment, the findings suggest that the Census cutoff, specifying that stay-at-home fathers cannot work or look for work to be counted, is too stringent given the widespread availability of temporary, freelance, and work-from-home opportunities for parents of either gender.

Second, while not the main focus of this paper, my critique of the stay-at-home father count could also point to a larger shift in the definition of "stay-at-home parenthood" in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. As parents take on volunteer work, part-time jobs and pursue hobbies (some with monetary gain), does our understanding of what "stay-at-home fatherhood" and "stay-at-home motherhood" *truly means* need to be reevaluated? My findings suggest that it does. For example, why is a woman whose children are under the care of a nanny each morning or who volunteers 20 hours a week counted as a "stay-at-home mother," while a father who works 10 hours each Saturday but cares for his children the rest of the week is not? How is time spent away from children for leisure activities different from time spent working if you are still the primary caregiver?

These are important questions that should be addressed in future research. For instance, scholars should examine whether similar dynamics occur among women who

identify as “stay-at-home mothers” to assess whether they too are employed in some capacity while serving as the primary caregiver. Similarly, future research might also inquire whether stay-at-home mothers are more likely to report their stay-at-home status/identity to the Census even if they work part-time, were dismissed from a job, or are in school. Moreover, it is important that we empirically explore, from a historical perspective, how the meaning of “stay-at-home parenthood” has shifted and transitioned over time in response to changes in the broader social, cultural and economic contexts. Perhaps the term “stay-at-home parent” has become antiquated in a society where mothers and fathers pursue and balance multiple identities and responsibilities daily. In the least, my findings strongly suggest that the US Census Bureau should consider replacing the designated term “stay-at-home father” with “primary caregiver.”

The findings offer a third important implication for how we conceptualize the duration of stay-at-home fatherhood and whether it can be measured the same way stay-at-home motherhood is. While is not unusual or overtly stigmatized for a woman to stay home until her children are independent or leave the house, the same is not necessarily true for male caregivers. My interviews clearly reveal a belief that stay-at-home fatherhood is a more temporary phenomenon that is shorter in duration than stay-at-home motherhood, as the majority of men expected and planned to return to the labor force after their children were in school full-time. In fact, 8 out of 10 stay-at-home fathers anticipated being back in the labor force full-time within the next 2 to 5 years. Furthermore, because American men and women are increasingly transitioning between jobs throughout their childbearing years (Casper & Bianchi, 2002) and experiencing job loss (particularly for men working in blue collar occupations) as a result of the recent US recession, it would not be unheard of for a father to stay home for less than a year when needed, at several different points in his life, or as a result of an unexpected job loss or period of unemployment. One full-time student even called himself a “part-time stay-at-home dad” because he and his wife would swap roles each semester depending on who had more flexibility. Thus, for many fathers, being a stay-at-home dad could be a temporary period of “opting out” of the labor force within an otherwise long-term employment trajectory. In this sense, the Census criteria that men must be out of the labor force for at least one year and their wives cannot be out of the labor force any weeks in the prior year should be adjusted to account for individuals who take on this role for shorter periods of time and transition in and out of jobs.

The fourth major implication of my findings relates to the reasons why men who care for their children full-time are “not in the labor force.” Besides not counting any employed stay-at-home fathers, fathers who report any reason for not working besides “to take care of home and family” are also eliminated from the Census count. My interviews suggest that some men might feel uncomfortable telling strangers that they are full-time caregivers, especially if they are only home for a short time or trial period. In addition, a number of fathers in my sample said they were initially staying home because they “could not find work” or were staying home but also “attending school” to change career paths. Two older stay-at-home fathers even referred to themselves as “retired.” Because the Census offers the alternatives of “illness/disability,” “going to

school,” “couldn’t find work,” “retired,” and “other,” it is quite possible that social desirability bias and the stigma associated with male unemployment could prompt many stay-at-home fathers to state an alternative reason. In addition, we don’t know for sure whether stay-at-home fathers see “taking care of the home” as part of their fatherly role, as the identity “homemaker” has traditionally been associated with mothers. Thus, if the Census altered its survey language or allowed more than one response, greater numbers of full-time fathers would likely be reported.

Fifth, the new estimates I calculated using ACS data suggest that as many as 1.4 million fathers could be staying home and taking care of children full-time if the Census criteria were expanded. This number would likely be even larger if the data allowed me to account for single, gay, divorced and cohabiting fathers. Nevertheless, this research fills a gap in the gender, work, family and fatherhood literatures by providing in-depth insight and understanding of the beliefs and behaviors of full-time fathers in the US today. In doing so, it also adds credence to the value of mixed-methods research. By demonstrating how qualitative methods and analysis can be used to verify, inform and improve quantitative models and measures, this paper suggests a way we can more accurately capture and empirically assess family forms that fluidly shift, adapt and evolve in response to broader social, cultural and economic forces.

Sixth, this piece speaks to the importance of considering both subjective and objective criteria when ascertaining the meaning of stay-at-home fatherhood. Instead of arguing that one is more valid or important than the other, I interpret both types of criteria as valuable and interrelated. My overall point is that by researching populations using more subjective criteria, we can improve and inform our objective criteria and measures. On one hand, when we used objective criteria and impose categories onto individuals with more complex social realities, we run the risk of eliminating individuals who claim an identity (such as stay-at-home father) but do not meet the criteria, thereby oversimplifying complex social phenomena. In this sense, we should not only use objective measures, but should also talk to the individuals who claim the identity to find out whether they fit the criteria used. In other words, subjective criteria and the nuance gained from qualitative work can be used to improve our objective criteria and measures. Still, objective measures are critical tools, particularly because they are often used to influence public policies and/or affect the stigma associated with social identities like “stay-at-home father.” Thus, I am not arguing that we do away with objective criteria, but rather, improve and inform them so they are in line with what is actually going on in the lives of fathers today. Continuing to acknowledge the subjective nature of our “objective measures” will improve and inform social research on fathers and families.

Finally, while the consequences of undercounting stay-at-home fathers are largely unknown, they could be widespread and affect social institutions ranging from education to the government, workplace and family. By not accurately capturing how many men take on primary caregiver roles in the US today, we do a disservice to fathers who are taking on and claiming the stay-at-home father identity. Most obviously, when fewer men are assumed to fill the role, it seems more likely that men who do embrace it will face stigmatization and social pressure to conform to traditional notions of masculin-

ity, reinforcing the male breadwinner and provider ideal. The undercount also potentially affects how workplaces perceive the care work fathers do, perhaps reducing the likelihood that male parental leave and gender-blind family policies will be adopted and taken seriously. Likewise, if men believe stay-at-home fatherhood to be non-normative, it is unlikely that men will opt to take paternity leave or stay home without fear of permanently jeopardizing their careers. Most importantly, by minimizing the presence of male primary caregivers, the focus on absent and distant fathers will continue to dominate public discourse and overshadow the positive outcomes father care might have on the socialization and life chances of children in the US. Thus, it is vital that fatherhood scholars continue to analyze, assess and realize the implications of how we choose to measure and conceptualize the diverse social constructions of fatherhood that exist in society today.

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